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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR PRAISES HIS ARMED FORCES

Classified By: DCM Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr explained to Senators Dodd and Kerry that stability in Lebanon, and in the region, rests on holding Syria responsible for its behavior. A key element of this is halting Syrian interference in Lebanon's internal political situation. Syria should be required to secure its border with Iraq and cease its support for Hizballah and Islamic militants in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, before gaining any dialogue from the USG. Murr stressed the role of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as the most dependable institution in the country. The LAF was the one institution that could rise above confessional lines and provide security against sectarian violence as well as assure stability within Lebanon. Murr also emphasized progress made in rebuilding the LAF. He asked for continued Congressional support in obtaining U.S. assistance to further enhance the Lebanese military. End Summary.

LAF MODERNIZATION, FURTHER U.S.
SUPPORT REQUIRED

2. (C) Senators Christopher Dodd and John Kerry, accompanied by staff, Charge d'Affaires and Emboffs, met with Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr at his residence on December 18. Murr said that one of the best ways to promote stability in Lebanon is additional U.S. equipment and training for the LAF. The LAF's discipline has shown itself as the Army provided security in the streets of downtown Beirut during the recent demonstrations. In essence, the LAF has demonstrated that it is the most dependable institution in the country. During the politically-charged demonstrations, the LAF did not break down along sectarian lines. This cohesion came from Murr's policy of recruiting "new people" and creating "new values" inside the armed forces. Murr explained that broadening recruitment to increase the non-Shia component of the LAF has contributed to a more cohesive force. Murr asked for more U.S. military assistance, stating that he would rather deal with the U.S. than Europe, due to the fact that most equipment in the LAF inventory was of U.S. origin. He pointed to the expected delivery of 300 HMMVMs as an example of the continued USG-Lebanon partnership.

SYRIA CANNOT AFFORD TO CHANGE

13. (C) Syria is the main threat to political stability in the region, Murr said. While Murr understood the USG search for "options" in Iraq, requesting assistance from the Syrians should not be one of them. He pointed out that Syria was responsible for training and allowing Syrian-Sunni insurgents to enter into Iraq via Syria's borders. Asked by Senator Dodd why an Alawite regime in Syria would support an extremist Sunni insurgency in Iraq, Murr responded that President Bashar al-Asad is thinking short term. Iraq is a safety valve, and allowing Syrian Sunni extremists to go to Iraq reduces the pressure on his regime in Damascus.

4 (C) The Syrian regime is not in a position to change its behavior, nor will it become a partner for stability in the region. Syria and Asad have too much to lose to go down this path. Murr counted off several challenges facing Asad. One is the mounting economic problems the country faces. Syria's state-run economy cannot be opened up without causing economic hardship to its people, which would eventually lead to the regime losing its control. Also, the political demographics are stacked against the Alawite regime. The Sunni majority are pushing for change. The regime must continue its behavior in the region just to maintain its hold on power. For now, Asad's Alawite regime is simply playing for time as a way of surviving.

15. (C) Murr stated that President Asad has his own agenda and interests when it comes to Lebanon. Asad is using the "Shia card" by backing Hizballah. He hopes that Syria can regain its political position within the Lebanese power structure by allying with a disenfranchised Shia community that is in turn striving to flex its political muscle. Asad will continue to support the militant Islamic groups in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. He needs an instrument of terror

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to frighten the Lebanese and remind them that he is still a strongman who demands to be respected.

BEFORE U.S./SYRIA DIALOGUE,
SYRIA NEEDS TO DELIVER

16. (C) Murr was frank about prospects for the U.S. engaging with the Syrian regime as a partner for regional security. While he reluctantly admitted that the U.S. should be able to talk to Syria to discern its positions, he cautioned that before the U.S. opens a full dialogue with Syria, it must first make sure that the Syrians deliver on benchmarks: closing the Syrian/Iraq borders to Sunni insurgents, not interfering in Lebanon's internal politics, and stopping the support of Islamic militants in the Palestinian camps.

17. (C) Senator Kerry asked if there was any U.S. leverage that could be used on Asad. Murr quickly responded, "No." He indicated that no amount of U.S. leverage could alter the direction of the Syrian regime, and especially the behavior of its president. Asad seeks to maintain his power at any cost. Asad sees his true political lifeline in Iran and supporting Hizballah in Lebanon, not by gaining recognition as a partner of the U.S. Murr ended the discussion of Syria by saying that the Asad regime is completely dependent on Iran. In the long run, Syrian cooperation with the U.S., especially in Iraq, is not going to happen. The U.S. is more likely to get assistance from Iran than from Syria.

18. (C) Senator Dodd wondered that if the Syrians are not the "right guys," then who would be the people to engage for regional security. Murr indicated Saudis would be the best. The Saudis have the most economic influence in the region, they usually seek consensus and like to negotiate rather than look for confrontation, and most important, they have the most to lose if the region goes up in flames.

AOUN WILL EVENTUALLY COME BACK

¶9. (C) Murr changed the discussion to Lebanon's internal politics. He thought it unlikely that General Michel Aoun would become president in 2007. Murr's prediction was that Hizballah would never allow or accept Aoun as president. Also, the Christian electorate is split on Aoun; they do not all like his marriage of convenience with Hizballah and his switch away from the anti-Syrian March 14 movement. Murr reasoned that once Aoun understood that the Presidency was out of his reach, and he had no where else to turn, he would then come back to the March 14 side.

POLITICAL OUTLOOK

¶10. (C) In concluding the meeting, Murr indicated that the political outlook for Lebanon is hazy. He cautiously said that political compromise is possible in Lebanon, but it will take time. The best way the U.S. can promote its own security, and not just that of Lebanon, would be to push its values of democracy, rather than use of military force.

¶11. (U) This message has not been cleared by CODEL Dodd.
FELTMAN